

Hello I am Leatrice Rabinsky. And I have the pleasure today of introducing Rose Kaplovitz to you. Rose is a survivor of the Holocaust. Today we are going to participate in an interview project sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women Holocaust Archives Project. This is Part 1 of the interview.

Rose, it is a pleasure to be with you again today. Could you please tell us something about yourself, your family, your present activities.

Yes, I could. I am very involved in Holocaust education since I feel very strongly about it. I feel that the young people of today have to know what happened so that it never happens again. I want them to know so they can safeguard against it ever happening again. I feel that if they do not learn from the past, it might happen again, anyplace, to anyone.

I am also involved in Jewish education. And that is very important to me for I, myself, had very little formal Jewish education before and during the war. And when I came to this country, I felt I had no identity whatsoever. I knew very little about my own religion except what I have seen and picked up at home. And I needed that identity for myself, to be a person. And that's why I feel that it's very important for everyone to know a little bit about their heritage.

Rose, you've done a remarkable job, also, with your family. And I understand that next week is a very special event for you and your family. Would you like us to share also in this by telling us about your family, the members, and what's going to be taking place?

Well, September 2, that's next week, my youngest son is getting married. He's married to a very lovely girl in Louisville, Kentucky. And I am very happy about the marriage. I am looking forward to it.

And I'm just thrilled about it. I have three marriage children. So that will make it three marriage children. I think I brought them up right. I'm hopeful. And now they have to do it on their own.

Do you want to tell us something about your husband?

Yes, my husband is also a survivor. He comes from a different country than I. We met here in Cleveland in 1949. We were married in 1951.

We are very happily married. We have a wonderful family. I have a grandchild now. So life seems to be good to me. And I am grateful for everything, especially for the opportunity to have lived my life in America.

Rose, your emphasis on family reflects a lot of what you have shared with us in the past about the childhood family relationships that you had and the beauty of your own family life. Would you like to perhaps reflect with us about what life was like in your hometown? Tell us where you come from. Tell us a little bit about your family and what some of your fondest recollections are.

I was born in Sosnowiec, Poland, which is the southwestern part of Poland. Our city was, by Polish standards, an average-sized city. Our home life, my home life was-- I have nothing but very pleasant memories of the pre-war life in Sosnowiec. My family consisted of my mother, my father, and we were seven children, six sisters and only one brother.

I had a happy childhood, attended school. Although in Sosnowiec, the school system worked differently than in many other parts of Poland. The Jewish children went to a school of their own. It was elementary school and ran on the same basis as any other school, but it was for Jewish children, separate.

So I had a lot of friends. And the schoolyard was across the street from my home. So we always had kids around our house. After school, all the kids would come over to my house. We had a big backyard. We would play all kinds of ball games.

My sisters and my brothers filled up the house all the time. I was never really lonesome in the house. There was always someone to play or to talk to.

As children we were all involved in sports. As a matter of fact, my brother was the only Jew on his soccer team. We all used to skate, winter, and use sleds. There were all kinds of games for children. We used to play volleyball and other games.

Family life as such, I think, was very close. The family ties of a European Jewish family were very, very close. I particularly remember holidays. Somehow you felt the holiday on coming. It was in the air.

Was your father a rabbi or a businessman?

No, my father was not a rabbi. We had a store, a grocery store. And my father worked there. And my mother was helping him also.

We were neither very wealthy nor poor. I would say middle class. My father was a religious man, though. But that's the way of life that was that time in Europe. Most of the people, most of our neighbors, most of the Jewish people that we knew were rather religious by American standards, for sure.

Did your father play any particular role in the synagogue or at holiday time?

Yes. My father belonged to the Benevolent Society. He would be raising money for the poor. He was also, so to speak, a shamash. I don't even know how to say it.

Caretaker.

Caretaker in the temple. He also was very involved in anything that had to do with the temple. On certain holidays that we blow a shofar, that is a ram's horn, my father was the man to do it. And I was always so proud of it. I thought that he is the greatest.

As a matter of fact, whenever I hear the shofar blowing now in a temple, I compare it. And it never sounds to me the same. It seems like no one can do it as well as my dad did.

My mother was busy with the store and was, of course, raising such a large family. But I was, I would say, pretty normal.

Were there any particular holidays that stand out in your mind with relationship to family gatherings, or games that you played, or foods that your mother prepared, do you have any especially fond memories of those times?

I think so. I think that each holiday had something special about itself. The food, of course, each holiday had its specific food.

But each holiday had its specific game. The children, the Jewish children in Europe, for each holiday, there was a different game. Like, for Passover, since you used a lot of nuts, we had a special game that we used hazelnuts.

We would dress up, just like you dress up Halloween here and go from house to house.

Oh, the Feast of Esther.

That was the Feast of Esther, right. Hanukkah, of course, the latkes and playing the dreidel and all kinds of games. But Shavuot, we would decorate our house in greenery, since it was a holiday. I mean, but each holiday had something very significant.

You felt it all about you. You didn't have to be told that this is this holiday. You knew automatically. I wish I could have the same kind of a feeling here and give it to my children. But somehow, it seems to be impossible to duplicate that. But I love to look back and think of those days.

Were the other members of the Sosnowiec community involved in this same type of celebration? For instance, you mentioned Shavuot to the time of the giving of the law--

Oh, yes, oh, yes, oh, yes, very much so. And on Purim, everybody would send goodies to you. And my mother would bake for other people. And all the children participated in all the rituals, so to speak.

We all looked forward to those holidays. And since we were going to an all Jewish school, the holidays, we did not attend school. You must remember, the school, though, it was for Jewish children only.

The language was Polish, just like in any other school. We had a teacher come once a week and teach religion. But that was all that was different from another school. As I said before, life was what we thought pretty normal, pretty good.

What was Sosnowiec like? Can you describe the layout of the city, the general types of people who lived there? Was it an industrial town, a suburban community? Could you tell us how many Jews lived in Sosnowiec? Do you recall?

Yes. Sosnowiec had light industry, so to speak. Many people were employed in trade. There was shoe manufacture. And nearby were coal mines, on the outskirts, on the outside of Sosnowiec.

There were many Jewish shopkeepers. The Jewish population in Sosnowiec was around 30,000 people, beginning of the war, I would say. And Jewish life thrived.

Did you have a particularly Jewish area? Or did you live in integrated or mixed communities?

Well, there was a Jewish area. There was a street called Modrzejowska. And it was all Jewish. We lived on Ostrogorska, which was a mixed neighborhood. In our own building, there were Jews as well as non-Jews living.

And we played together, with the non-Jewish, with the Christian children all the time. We only went to a different school. But once we would come home, and in Europe we used to go to school only half a day, we went-- we would come home around 1:00 or 2 o'clock. And then we all played together.

Did the families, adults seem to have a rapport with each other as well? Do you recall any friendships that your parents had with the non-Jewish families?

Well, they were neighbors. So I don't know. My parents didn't sit and play cards with their neighbors like you do here and do many things that I myself do now. It was a different way of life. You worked hard. You had your temple, business, or whatever.

But we were involved with our neighbors. We knew them well. They used to shop in our store. We played with them.

My father, my mother knew them very well, saw them every day. I think that the neighbors were much closer than the neighbors are here. You knew quite a bit about your neighbor, maybe sometimes too much.

I see.

Yeah.

Could you tell me about political life, or Zionistic life? Do you recall, as a child, talking in any way about the politics of your area, or politics involving Jews, or politics involving Palestine at the time?

Well, Zionist organizations were very strong in Sosnowiec. And there were quite a few. There must have been about seven or eight different youth organizations.

I think it was wonderful. There was Betar. There was Gordonia, Hashomer Hatzair, Hashomer Hadati, Hanoar Hatzioni,

to which all of my sisters and brothers belonged.

So the teaching about Israel, about what was then, of course, Palestine, was quite common. I was too young to belong to an organization. But I learned a lot from just listening to my sisters and my brother.

I think it was good. Because we, at least, had a dream. From time to time, you heard about a young person leaving his hometown, going to Palestine.

Of course, the family, they were happy. Yet that was a heartbreak. Because, again, they hated to see their child leave their home, knowing that who knows if and when they will see each other again. But as a whole, the Zionist movement was very strong.

Also, the charitable movement was very strong. There were a lot of poor people. I recall that as long as I can remember, really, back, that my father, every Friday when he went to the synagogue Friday evening, he would come home.

And every Friday without an exception, he would bring a poor person or an orphan home for dinner. So our Friday night dinner was always, always, for as long as I remember, shared with somebody that needed it very badly. I think it was a wonderful lesson to all of us.

My father did not have to tell us why he was doing, or that it was necessary. But we learned that it's important to be able to share with the unfortunate ones.

Right. Do you recall, perhaps, that your father, or uncles, or neighbors were involved with the Sosnowiec, perhaps, government or council? How did you relate to the general government of the community? And did you have any Jewish representation? Do you recall hearing talk about this, to the general Polish government?

I don't know too much about it. But certain things I know. That if you needed, if two Jews needed to go to court, they went to a rabbi. And they resolved their differences with the rabbi rather than go to the Polish court. Unless a Pole and a Jew was involved, then they had to go to the government court.

There was a Jewish Kultusgemeinde, so to speak, that took care of the Jewish needs. But otherwise, I don't know very much about the structure of the Polish government in my home town.

What about the Jewish cultural life there? You mentioned this organization. Do you recall anything about an orchestra, about a choral group, a theater?

Of course. Don't forget there was an orphanage in Sosnowiec. There was a home for aged. And there was Jewish theater.

I don't know if it was Sosnowiec-based or if, from time to time, it was a traveling. I don't recall that. But I know from time to time my parents would go to the Jewish theater.

My mother also went to the non-Jewish theater. I don't remember whether my father did or not. But then again, my father was such a busy man. I don't know if he really had time for those things.

But my mother used to love to go. There were movies. There were theaters. There was quite a lot going on in the city.

So as you can recall, Sosnowiec was quite a large town.

It was quite a nice town, too. Our street was beautiful. In the middle of the street, between the buildings and the street, there were beautiful lawns with flowers. And every spring, the city would send out workers. And they would plant flowers. And it looked so beautiful.

I loved our street. That's where I was born. And that's where I lived.

Right. Do you recall anything about the change in climate? Because many people say that the winters in Poland are fierce. Do you recall that?

Yes, they are. But being as young as I was, I loved winters. Oh, we looked forward to the winter time. Somehow, you see, you did not have to go to the phone, call a friend. We didn't have a phone.

You just went out of your house. And already, you had a lot of children. We played all kinds of games in the snow.

First of all, ice skating, you didn't have to go even to the ice skating rink. The streets were so packed down that you could ice skate in the street, which we did. That's where I learned, really, ice skating.

Going to the ice skating rink, you had to pay. And my older sister went. Once in a while, she would take me. But she really wasn't happy about it. She wanted to be with her friends and not to have me as a tagalong.

And then there was a certain way of sled riding, especially around Christmas time. There was a big sled pulled by a horse. And through that big sled, you would attach a whole row of small sleds.

And everybody would have bells. And when the horse started moving and all those sleds following, it was a beautiful sight. And we would sing. And the bells would be ringing.

It was great. But then we must remember, the streets of Sosnowiec were not as busy with cars. You couldn't possibly do it in Cleveland because there just wouldn't be room for all that. But I loved winter. Even though, again, we looked forward to spring.

You have many happy memories, then, of a childhood in Sosnowiec.

Yes, very happy memories.

Do you recall any close friends that you had? Would you like to tell us about them?

Yes, I did. First of all, you must remember that the friends that went to school with me lived around the corner, some in the same building, some in the building next to mine. All you had to do was run out of the school and, again, we were together.

And we were very close. You must remember, we didn't go to picnic as a family unit most of the time. We went to picnic, especially, it started in May. We used to call it Mayovka, after the month of May.

You used to get up at 6 o'clock in the morning, all the children in the neighborhood. Take with you food and go out into the fields. Of course, no sooner we got there, we ate our bread out and everything. And then we just played. And then we came home.

But it was the idea of getting up early. You had to get up early and to get out into the field to see everything just coming to life, chasing butterflies. And I think it was a beautiful, beautiful, really, a relaxed childhood. There was no fear of the kind that we know now of children going alone someplace, of course.

Shortly before the war, I started to learn how to ski. I didn't have skis of my own. But a neighbor's son had skis. And we all were using it. One person had it, we all had it. Sometimes you just used one ski so two people could use them.

You did that sometimes with skates, too. You took one of your skates, gave it to somebody else, and you just skate on one foot. Whatever, just to share and have fun.

With all of this fun, Rose, do you have any recollection of some dark shadows over that childhood, perhaps of any feelings of anti-Semitism that may have occurred in the area? Or did you hear talk among the grown ups in the family of

any incidence of anti-Semitism?

Well, maybe because I was too young, but not until about 1938. To me, it seemed like it began then. But I am sure that anti-Semitism thrived in our city and in Poland, in particular throughout many years. But it wasn't as visible to me because, as I say, maybe I was too young even to spot it.

But sporadically it happened. From time to time, the Poles would throw stones and break windows in Jewish homes.

Did it ever happen to your house?

No, it did not. We were more fortunate, I think, because you know, as they say, in numbers, there is strength. Seven children, you know, nobody picked on us, really. Because then they had to put up with all seven of us.

Especially my older sister, she was a tomboy. And no one, no one would dare to pick on her because she got even with anyone. And sort of, we followed suit. We realized that if you are afraid, if you run away, you will be chased. So you better stand on your ground and fight back and stand your ground. That's the only way that you will be left alone.

We're still going at that time to our own school in 1938. I would like to show you a picture of some of my school pictures.

Wonderful.

I retrieved this. And when I was in Israel, one of my friends gave it to me. This is a school when I was in my second grade. And this is me here.

I have another picture of school, this one. This is in a school play. And here I am, a little girl.

And for Mother's Day, we would put up plays for our mothers. The mothers would come to school and we would perform.

This was in about 1938?

This was in 1938, this picture. Yes.

Do you recall how many children you would have in a class?

The classes were quite large. I would say about 30 children to a class. But the structure was such that you had one teacher from the first to the seventh grade. And then other teachers would come and teach different subjects. And my teacher's name was Helen Bergman.

Other students thought that she was mean. I adored her. But I adored anything. I loved school very much. It meant a lot to me.

Do you remember any favorite subject that you had or subjects in which you excelled?

Well, I always loved history. I was excellent in mathematics. Really, I don't know what I liked less or more. I liked everything about the school.

I started a year earlier. Because living across the street, don't forget that a lot of the teachers, even the principal, were shopping in our stores. So they got to know me.

I could read before I started school so I started school one year earlier and then I was skipped a year. So I was really actually in a class with children who were a little bit older than myself. But it didn't bother me.

But going back to the environment, especially concerning anti-Semitism, you saw the changing times. You knew something was happening. The Polish people as such were not very sympathetic to the Jews.

You must remember that the Jews of Poland were actually invited to Poland by the King of the 11th century, King Casimir. At that time, the economy was very bad. And he invited the Jewish people to Poland from Germany. And the Jews, throughout the ages, have been very devoted, loving their country, and have helped their economy.

But it seemed that the Jews of Poland were going through different periods. At times they had it good. Then there were pogroms. Anti-Semitism was on the rise. Then it subsides, and it was quiet again, then, again.

And I will say it was not an exception. There was visible anti-Semitism. There was name calling among the children even.

Anything happen to your store?

Yes. And that was in summer of 1939. And that sort of shook me up terrible. One morning, since our store was next to our home, I got up in the morning, went into the street, and I was shocked.

There were two Poles standing in front of our store holding huge posters which said this is a Jewish store. Do not support it. And they would not allow any Poles to enter.

What was your reaction when you saw it? What did you do?

First, I wanted to scream. I couldn't understand why. I couldn't understand what have we done, or my father, that suddenly we were faced with that. I think it caused my father an awful lot of pain because he had a lot of Polish customers with whom he talked always, with whom he debated politics, who became sort of like friends. And suddenly, this horrible division, this pointing out. But of course, we didn't realize that this was just something that would be more evident as time went on.

What about non-Jews in the area? How did they react, those who had been your closest friends?

The closest friends, some of them were really shocked at that. Yet, I don't know if they did not want to cause a controversy or commotion. They stayed away for a while. And eventually, those two Poles walked away. I mean, they couldn't just come and stand there every single day. It would be ridiculous.

But that left me thinking. And that left me realizing that perhaps what my sisters are hearing and learning in their Zionist organizations has a lot of basis. And I was thinking about a lot of the things although I was, as I said, too young to join.

Do you recall some of the neighbors? Were they all Poles? Or did some of them have German affiliation?

Well, in 1938, there were a lot of German Jews coming to Poland. Those were Jews who were expelled from Germany because they or their ancestors were born in Poland. So they were-- excuse me-- they were declared by Hitler as Polish Jews.

Don't forget, Sosnowiec was very close to the German border. So there were many Poles whose ancestry probably was German also. A lot of people, my parents, for example, I know they spoke both Polish, German, and Russian fluently.

But the German Jews who were living in our city at that time, especially I befriended one family and the children in that family. We became good friends. And what was amazing to me, here they were thrown out from their country. Yet they were totally German. They tried to learn Polish out of necessity.

But all their thoughts, everything pointed back to Germany. They were still hoping and dreaming that soon, soon, they probably thought very soon, that Hitler will be done away with. And they will be able to return back to Germany. They

wanted to go back to Germany.

Germany was their home. Indeed, Germany was their homeland. They felt themselves German first, Jewish second.

Did your family get along or other Jewish families who were primarily Polish ancestry, did they get along with these Germans? Or did you find that there may have been a rift between them?

Well, to the Poles, they were Germans. To the Germans, they were Poles. But the Jewish people of my hometown really opened their homes and their hearts to these people. They were unfortunate people. They came with nothing.

The Jewish Society of Cleveland took care of those.

Sosnowiec.

Sosnowiec, I mean, took care of them. And they were provided for.

Now there may have been, since there were Jews who had this dual relationship, were there Poles, Christian Poles, who found themselves in Poland but with an allegiance to Germany at this period of time?

Well, I am certain that there were because we saw the results of it later. But in 1938 and '39, they wouldn't give themselves away. Don't forget, that would be dangerous to them. That was still Poland. Until beginning of the war, they recognized themselves as Poles and not until after Hitler entered the city that they identified with Germany again.

Now when you think about this period of time at the beginning of 1939, had you ever heard the word "Nazi?" Did your family ever talk about anything that had happened in Germany from the early '30s on, persecution of Jews? Did you know or discuss this?

I did not know. I was very young. So I really didn't--

How old were you about that time?

On September 1, when Hitler declared war on Poland, I was nine years old, September 6 being my birthday. So I really was maybe too young to know that much about the politics.

Had you heard the word "Nazi?"

No, I never heard the word "Nazi" myself. Maybe people heard it. But I don't recall it. And probably it would have meant nothing to me anyway, even if I would have heard it.

But we knew of the situation in Germany. We heard of Kristallnacht from the people who came to Poland, from the German Jews. But yet, we thought of it as an outbreak, anti-Semitic outbreak, just as they had pogroms in Poland at times.

See, my father, my mother remembered first World War vividly. They were under the Russians. And they were hoping that if there is a war, it's better to be under Germany than Russians.

Why did they feel that?

Because they knew of the hard times they had during World War I under the Russian regime. And they were afraid of the Russians, of the Communists in particular. My father was the farthest thing from a Communist.

And after all. Germany was such a highly cultural country. It was so developed scientifically, culturally. It was one of the most modern countries in Europe. I mean, who, in his wildest dream, could ever imagine what was brewing in Germany and what Hitler was planning for the Jewish people of Europe?

As a nine-year-old little girl, Rose, what were the first signs to you that there was some type of political upheaval or unrest? What happened in your family? What kind of decisions were being made?

Shortly before the war, that was in the summer of '39, you saw signs. First of all, people were being trained in use of gas masks. At that time, you were still using gas masks. Today, they are worthless.

Then they were training people to be on the lookout for planes, oncoming planes. I don't know what good would it do if somebody would stand on the roof and look out for a plane and the plane would be coming. What do you do then?

All kind of training process, how to preserve yourself, how to save water and to have water in the basement, and to run in case of a bombing, to run into the basement. We didn't have bomb shelters or any such thing.

But while this was going on, at the same time, I don't know if it was a distraction that people should not be aware. You know, Poland was actually sold out. And maybe somebody was working from the other end, trying to distract the people from the knowledge of the oncoming war. Because at the same time officials of the city were going from building to building and inspecting it. And they would post signs on buildings. [NON-ENGLISH], which means to be renewed, or to be torn down, or to be rebuilt.

All this together with the other thing, so it was rather confusing. Why, if there is an oncoming war and you prepare yourself for the war, why are you concerned about beautifying the city? So really, it was confusing to the people of our hometown.

Do you recall any names of leaders in the community at that time?

Before the war?

Yes.

Of Sosnowiec community?

Yes.

No, but I only remember that they were talking that Poland is being sold out by its minister Beck. I don't know. I think that he was the foreign minister or something.

But I am not sure. So I wouldn't want to go on record as making a statement such as this. But I think that's what was being talked about.

Do you recall, then, what was the tension that was building up then in this crucial summer of 1939? What did you think about at that time as a nine-year-old little girl?

Oh, I wasn't concerned about the war. As a matter of fact, I was making a decision for me. All my sisters and brothers, they had a rabbi come every day after school and teach them how to pray, how to speak, how to read Yiddish.

I didn't have that. Because my father saw that he had so much trouble with the other ones, they wanted to go and play, just like everybody else. So he said when you be nine years old, you will start.

And I, somehow, didn't like what I saw happening with my sisters. And I loved my teacher that used to come once a week to my class and teach us religion. And I found out that he teaches us Hebrew, not prayers, but Hebrew.

And I made a proposition to my father. That I'll be a good girl. I'll do everything he wants me to.

But instead of learning with the old rabbi, who really was too old, he just needed to make a living, I wanted to take

lessons with Mr. Goldberg, learning Hebrew.

The spoken language.

Spoken language, the Hebrew that was spoken in Palestine, that the Halutzim, the pioneers of Israel spoke. And my father agreed, as shocking as it was to me. Because, after all, you had to learn the holy language first.

But my father agreed. And I said I will learn the prayers and everything else, too. But please let me study Hebrew.

That was your concern in the summer of '39?

I was all absorbed in myself. I mean, politics and the world situation didn't interest me at all. Why should it have?

What was the first sign, then, that there was a war that was imminent? What do you recall? What upset you?

The radio, the blessing of the radio, those different certain words were coming through, chocolate, chocolate, or coffee. Those were, of course, passwords. They meant nothing to us.

But the closer we were getting to the war, the more of it. I mean, the war was imminent by that time. It was in the air. You felt that a war is oncoming. You just did not know when and how.

Do you recall anything that your parents said? Did they make any plans? Or what did your older sisters or your brothers say?

Well, very shortly, just before the war started, my parents decided that if there is going to be a war, we should move to Kielce. Kielce was more centrally located in Poland. That was where my older sister-- I had two married sisters by then-- my older sister, my second oldest sister lived in Kielce with her husband. And my mother and my father felt that perhaps, since we are so very close to the border where the actual fighting might go on, that we should perhaps leave and go to my sister until all this will be over and we would return.

This was during the summer of '39?

This was the end. That was already end of August. That was just shortly before eventually the war broke out.

Did you do that? Did you carry that out?

And we did that. We left everything behind. And we boarded a train, the whole family, my other married sister, who lived in Sosnowiec, she and her husband and her baby, and all of us, my whole family, my father and mother and my brother and my sister.

What did you take with you?

We didn't take much. Because we were going to my sister. And we were planning to come back once the fighting is over, if there will actually be any. We still were hoping that maybe there won't be a war. But, for safety, my father felt that we should leave. We boarded a train and left.

This was the end of August?

That was the very end of August. I don't remember if it was August 31 or 30 or something like that. But already, we heard already, while on the train, I think, that we heard, knew already that the war was declared.

The train at first moved smoothly. Then it came to a sudden stop. We didn't know why we stopped in a no man's land. We disembarked.

Everybody was asking everybody else what's happening. But really, no one knew. Then suddenly the train started. Everybody jumped back wherever we could. And we moved.

And several more times the train stopped. At one point, the train stopped because we were being bombed from above. So the German planes were already bombing the Polish territory. We disembarked and ran in different directions. And then we reassembled.

And it was then that we saw, we realized that my brother was not among us. There were all the girls and my father and my mother. But my brother was no longer with us.

Did you have any idea what happened to him?

We had no idea what happened. We forget. Maybe he did not have a chance to jump onto the train at the last stop.

Maybe he will take the next train. Or maybe even he returned home. We really had no idea what happened to my brother.

Soon we were overtaken by the German army. They were already-- so we knew that Sosnowiec, by that time, had been captured or whatever. And now we were overtaken by the German army.

Were you close to Kielce then? Do you recall?

Nowhere near it. No, I don't think we even went halfway. And we were taken off the trains. We were forced to go into that small little town or village, whatever it was. I don't even know.

And we had to stay there. Some people took us in. And after several days, when our papers were being checked out, we were allowed to return.

I remember we had to return by foot, of course. And I remember going back, we had to cross a bridge. And somehow, right on the bridge, the guards were standing and checking your papers.

I remember my sister pushing the buggy with her little girl. And somehow we were petrified. Because whatever paper was not in order, they would throw you into the river.

There was no question of going, checking out your papers. If everything wasn't legal, if everything wasn't clear, you were just dumped in.

You mean, they just threw them over the bridge?

They just threw you over the railing into the river. So we were petrified.

Do you recall hearing any screams?

Of course. Every time somebody was thrown, they were screaming. I mean, wouldn't you? Wouldn't I?

Well, anyway, we were allowed to pass. And we made it finally back to Sosnowiec. And that's where the initial shock set in. That's when I, myself, and my family felt the terrible impact of the war.

What did you find in Sosnowiec?

We came home. My brother was not there. We still did not know what happened until my aunt came over and told us what has transpired while we were away.

My brother did not make it onto the train. But he wasn't happy about the train altogether. He really wanted to join the

Polish army, but he was too young. He was 16, so he couldn't.

Anyway, he didn't make the train. We don't know if he didn't make it because it was too late for him or because he decided he was tired of it. Anyway, he made it back to Sosnowiec.

And since no one by us was at home, he went to my aunt's house and stayed with my aunt. And when the Nazis entered Sosnowiec, and I want you to know that Sosnowiec was captured by the Nazis without one shot being fired--

Did they tell you how that was affected, what happened?

Nothing. See, our city, our street, Ostrogorska, where I lived, led straight from [PLACE NAME]. And [PLACE NAME] was on the border. So they came straight from Germany. They came straight. And they had to pass our street.

Nothing happened on our street. Suddenly, they went to several homes, to several buildings, and where my aunt lived. And my brother was staying with my aunt since he went there.

They came to that particular building. It was buildings at random that they picked. There had to be no special reason for anything. And they called out, [GERMAN]. All Jewish males out.

So this was like an apartment building. Were several families--

It was a big apartment building, yes. Well, most of us lived in big apartment building. People in Sosnowiec didn't live in single houses. Most of them were tall structures.

They called out [GERMAN]. All male Jews out. Of course, don't forget that was the first day of the war. No one even knew what to expect. No one had an idea what will happen.

So my uncle, his older son, my brother, my girlfriend, Dorcia Greenbaum who went to school with me, her father and two of his sons, and 13 other males stepped out from that particular building. The same thing happened in other buildings throughout the city. All in all, they gathered a few hundred Jewish males.

Was your aunt a witness to this?

My aunt was a witness to it. But she did not know what they were called for. She thought maybe it's a sporadic check or whatever. Who could suspect anything?

Anyway, soon they were marched off to the outskirts of our city. There they were told to dig three long ditches. They obeyed, not knowing even what to expect. And besides that, you have soldiers bearing machine guns standing over you, you obey.

They obeyed. And upon finishing, the Nazi guards took out their machine guns, cut them down, buried them in the three mass graves. Those that were dead and those that were still alive.

I only hope that my brother was dead. I know that in his death, he did not know why he was dying. He died only because he was a Jew and for no other reason at all.

When we found this out, I can't possibly describe the shock, the terror that struck us. I can't tell you what happened to our family as a unit.

My mother's hair turned gray practically overnight. My father's face became so sad. His eyes became different eyes. I never saw the sparkle anymore in his eyes.

A Jewish man, to him, a son is very important. Because he is the one that will say Kaddish, the prayer after the father dies. And this is an honor to a Jewish father. And this was the only son that he had. And he was killed mercilessly for no

reason at all.

Rose.

And I believe my father could not accept it.

Rose, how did your family find this out? What was the situation when they returned to Sosnowiec?

When we returned to Sosnowiec, our store was empty. Everything was taken out of it. We don't know if the Poles opened it up and took it out or whether it was the Nazis. We never found out. But in view of what just happened to us, this was so unimportant.

Our family life suddenly took a complete turn. Our home became a very quiet place, a sad place. I knew then, in 1939 in September, that life will never be the same to me. But of course, little did I know that this was only the beginning of things to come.

Was it your aunt who greeted you when you entered the town? Was she the one who informed you?

No, she did not know that we came. We went to seek her out to tell her that we are home and to tell us of the whereabouts of our brother. And that's when we found out.

Our aunt soon moved into the same building where we were. Because this was my father's brother. So to my father, it was a terrible blow. He lost his brother, a nephew, and of course, his only son.

This was probably a double tragedy that my aunt moved in. Because she had only one more son. So theirs was a small family. And not enough that my mother went on crying constantly. My aunt helped her.

So it was really a place-- I used to run out of the house. I didn't want to stay home. It no longer meant happiness. It no longer was a pleasant place. It was a place where there was cries and sadness and misery. And I tried to really stay away from home.

What about the other Jews in Sosnowiec? What kind of impact did this tragedy have on their lives early in September?

It was a terrible blow to the whole community as a whole. But everybody took it as a single incident. We did not know why. People tried to speculate what happened. Maybe somebody has done something. Why this incident?

But with time, people really passed it off as a single incident, hoping that this was it. This was just an incident of war. Although it wasn't, because none of these people were wearing uniforms. None of them were soldiers or fighters or revolutionaries or anything like it.

Many of them were very Orthodox Jews who never would pick up arms. Besides my brother was 16 years old. What had he done?

Were there any witnesses to this tragedy?

Yes, there were witnesses.

Did they come and talk to you about it?

See, they had to get others to cover the graves. So there were witnesses to that.

Rose, this tragedy impacted on your entire family. And we're going to continue briefly and you will tell us then what happened to your family and to the other Jews in Sosnowiec after this beginning of the tragedy of World War II in the Holocaust period.

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